

The peace activist who loved a general; Petra Kelly made the Green Party a force, but she was also full of contradictions, writes the author of a new novel about her

The Toronto Star

September 6, 2020 Sunday

Copyright 2020 Toronto Star Newspapers Limited

Section: INSIGHT; Pg. IN1

Length: 1240 words

Byline: Shaena Lambert Special to the Star

Body

In 1992, Petra Kelly - leader of the worldwide fight against nuclear missiles and co-founder of the German Green Party - was found dead in her home in a quiet suburb of Bonn. Nearby lay the body of her lover, an ex-NATO general.

What led her to this place - how she lived and why she died - are questions I brooded over as I wrote my novel, "Petra." Petra Kelly changed the trajectory of modern politics, founding the first-ever Green party to rise to prominence worldwide. A blast of light and fresh air in the grey-suited male world of German politics, she also led the largest demonstrations Europe had ever seen.

That she's largely forgotten today, as too many brilliant women are forgotten by history, is beyond a shame. If ever we needed Petra Kelly - her fire and her ecological thinking, her ability to set visionary goals and to realize them - it is now.

In our age of climate anxiety, we can forget how recently we passed through another age of terror, with its own, incendiary resistance.

In 1979, when NATO announced plans to place nuclear missiles in West Germany to face Russia's SS-20 missiles, experts feared a battlefield nuclear war, which could escalate within minutes to all-out global confrontation.

A million protesters marched in New York; women set up their iconic peace camp in Greenham Common; while West Germany saw waves of protests, each larger than the last, as a new generation, sickened by their country's Nazi past, came together to say no.

Half-German, half-American (she left West Germany with her family at the age of 12, returning in her 20s), Petra Kelly shot onto the German left scene with an energy that seemed American, fresh. Her quick mind, fragile beauty and riveting speaking abilities soon made her a media star.

While leading the anti-missile protests (arrested at a nuclear weapons base; electrifying mass gatherings; arguing circles around her opponents on national TV) she also came together with a handful of other visionaries to create a new kind of political party, with a far-reaching platform of non-violence, feminism, ecology and grassroots empowerment.

Petra led the Greens to a stunning electoral success in 1983. Winning over 31/2 million votes, they marched into the German legislature holding 28 seats, and power and influence beyond this impressive number.

The peace activist who loved a general; Petra Kelly made the Green Party a force, but she was also full of contradictions, writes the author of a new novel about....

Anxious before every speech, yet electrifying on stage; narcissistic yet famous for her generosity; Petra Kelly was a bundle of contradictions. None was lived so publicly as her love affair with Gert Bastian, the ex-NATO general - a married man 20 years her senior.

He stunned Europe by quitting NATO over its nuclear missile decision, then joining Petra and the Greens, becoming Petra's lover and constant consort. A grey-suited figure in their rainbow of colour, it was rumoured that he had a chilling Nazi past - and possibly ties with the East German secret service, the Stasi.

I met Petra Kelly and the general in 1986. As the co-ordinator of a peace festival for Vancouver's Centennial, I arranged for them to fly in to speak at the Orpheum Theatre.

Even before she got off the plane, a controversy swirled around her. Some organizers with pro-Soviet views (there were many closeted and open communists in the Eighties peace movement) believed she would use her time on stage to denounce Russia's position on human rights, or attack East Germany for its treatment of peace activists. They were struggling to control her - not realizing that nobody controlled Petra Kelly.

When she took to the stage, not only did she speak truth to totalitarianism, but she took Canada to task for its treatment of Indigenous peoples. Leaning forward at the microphone, sweeping her boyish blond-brown hair from her eyes, she wove together a passionate vision of ecology, feminism, love for the planet, rights for First Nations, equity for the poorest nations and, always, the need for freedom for Tibet.

I was shaken by how deeply she saw connections between issues, and how brilliantly she shook out the blanket that held all of them. It was, I realize, my first experience of what's now called intersectionality. Having toed the line in my peace work, being told not to extend the scope of our work or we'd lose coalition partners, meeting her was like having iron hoops removed from my chest.

As she came off the stage, she was embraced by her general.

Later, Petra and I were chatting outside the theatre. The general nodded quietly beside her. Then noticing the light rain, he ran inside and came back with an umbrella. He took her bags and, as I watched, flabbergasted, he shepherded Petra across the street.

How, I wondered, could this icon of feminist power be so powerful on stage, yet not manage to cross the street without the help of a man? Or, for that matter, hold an umbrella over her own head? What bound this strange couple together?

Five years later, I was in my office at the Canadian Peace Alliance in Toronto when a friend came in and sat on the broken Ikea couch. "Have you heard?" he said. "Petra Kelly is dead."

It seemed impossible that the light that was Petra Kelly was gone.

Having several crossed wires can be how a piece of fiction begins. A few things that don't make sense. A packed-up bit of irony that you feel compelled to unpack. I left the peace movement and became a writer and a mother. Yet always in the back of my mind was that image of Petra reaching for the arm of her general. The twisted contradictions in her character fed me as I finally sat down to write the book.

The act of witnessing the past - Vergangenheitsbewältigung (the beautiful mouthful that is the German word for it) - teaches that we must go deeply into the past, experiencing it both intellectually and emotionally, if we hope to move forward without recreating the same horrors. We need to peer into the times that created both Petra and Gert Bastian, the darkness of Nazism and Eastern Bloc totalitarianism, the struggles of the nuclear age, the Cold War resistance.

The darkness is a warning, but it comes with a flare of light, because Petra, and her band of visionaries, and the millions who stood with them, did in fact change the world.

The peace activist who loved a general; Petra Kelly made the Green Party a force, but she was also full of contradictions, writes the author of a new novel about....

A totalitarian superpower - which George Orwell described, in "1984," as a boot in the face forever - imploded, and with heart-stopping speed the Iron Curtain fell. People danced on the Berlin Wall, then pounded it into rubble and souvenirs. The Green party maintained a critical influence in Germany, and now has a solid hold in the political life of dozens of countries.

And NATO's nuclear missiles? Many of those military bases were retrofitted - turned into education centres or converted to condos.

Perhaps most importantly, Petra's vision - linking racism with peace, with ecology, with feminism, seeing our fights not as disparate but as a mighty web, connecting us to the Earth and to each other - has gained power with each movement that rallies in the streets. Million-strong climate marches. #MeToo. Black Lives Matter. How Petra would have cheered!

Her flame burns on in Greta Thunberg's resistance, and in Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's fiery opposition to Donald Trump.

What can Petra Kelly teach us 30 years after her death? So many things, but one is the truth hiding in plain sight. The power we unleash when we refuse to give up.

The power of hope.

Shaena Lambert is the author of four works of fiction, most recently "Petra," published this month with Random House Canada.

shaenalambert.com

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Document-Type: COLUMN

Publication-Type: NEWSPAPER

Subject: GERMAN POLITICAL PARTIES (90%); NOVELS & SHORT STORIES (90%); NUCLEAR WEAPONS (90%); WEAPONS & ARMS (90%); WRITERS (90%); ECOLOGY & ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCE (89%); ELECTIONS & POLITICS (89%); NEGATIVE MISC NEWS (89%); NEGATIVE NEWS (89%); POLITICS (89%); PROTESTS & DEMONSTRATIONS (89%); TRENDS & EVENTS (89%); US GREEN PARTY (89%); CAMPAIGNS & ELECTIONS (78%); CELEBRITIES (78%); DEATH & DYING (78%); MILITARY WEAPONS (78%); NEGATIVE PERSONAL NEWS (78%); US POLITICAL PARTIES (78%); GOVERNMENT & PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION (73%); FEMINISM & WOMEN'S RIGHTS (68%); LEGISLATIVE BODIES (63%)

Industry: NUCLEAR WEAPONS (90%); WRITERS (90%); CELEBRITIES (78%); MILITARY WEAPONS (78%)

Geographic: NEW YORK, USA (78%); GERMANY (97%); EUROPE (92%); RUSSIAN FEDERATION (55%)

Load-Date: September 6, 2020

The peace activist who loved a general; Petra Kelly made the Green Party a force, but she was also full of contradictions, writes the author of a new novel about....

End of Document